

TRAVEL

by Sharon Stephenson

Hot pursuits

Big Island is known for its coffee, but it's best not to stay awake all day in the heat.

It's probably a good thing TripAdvisor didn't exist in 1778. Back then, explorer Captain James Cook, the first European to set foot on the Hawaiian islands, called them "dirty and uninspiring" and the natives "insolent". A year after making landfall on what he christened the "Sandwich Islands", the grumpy British explorer was stabbed to death by a group of locals.

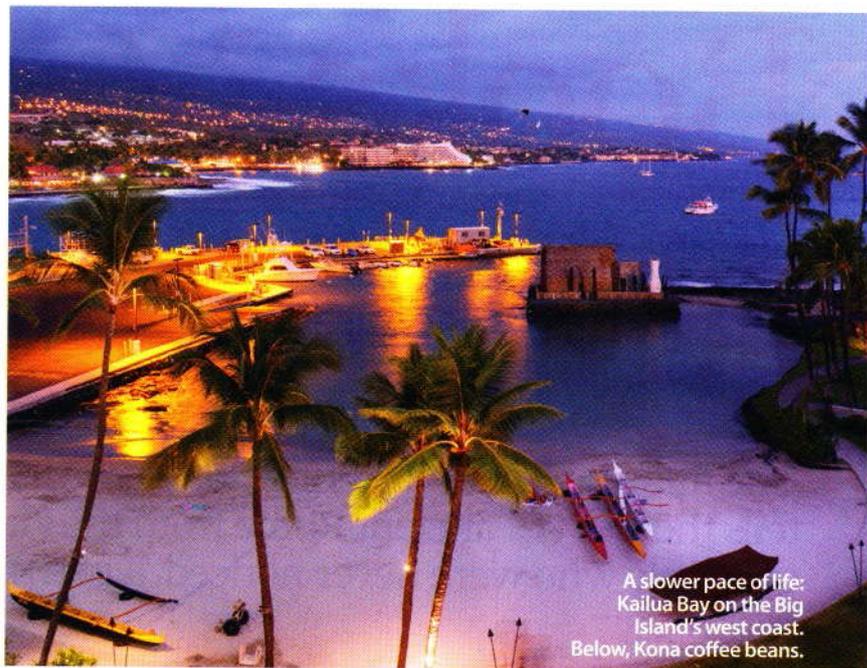
But time appears to have healed the wounds and monuments dedicated to Cook are common. The grandest is the white obelisk that overlooks Kealahou Bay, where Cook eventually met his grisly fate. There's even a town called Captain Cook on the lush western side of the island and numerous businesses and streets bear his name.

"Big Islanders have the sacred art of relaxation down to a fine art."

For most people, Hawaii begins and ends with Waikiki's resorts, shops and umbrella-adorned cocktails. But Waikiki is no more Hawaii than London is Britain. A 40-minute flight away is the Big Island, twice the size of the archipelago's other 130 islands combined. It was originally christened Hawaii, but when that name was stretched to include the entire island chain, locals said, "Let's just call our island the Big Island." And so they did.

Big Island's 10,000sq km landmass is also the most geologically raucous of the group, being bookended by Hualalai and Mauna Loa volcanoes, the latter the world's largest active volcano. It's what draws many visitors: the rippling sea of ebony rock that runs down to the turquoise Pacific, carving large gashes in the highway and causing people to pull over to gawk.

But there's more to the Big Island than lava. Arriving at Hilo, the island's capital, we detour to the charmingly ramshackle Hilo Farmers Market, named by the Huffington Post as one of the leading farmers' markets in the US. It started with four



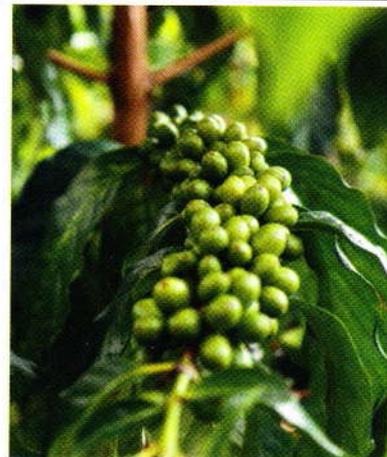
A slower pace of life: Kailua Bay on the Big Island's west coast. Below, Kona coffee beans.

vendors in 1988, but these days more than 200 stallholders crowd the parking lot with their multi-ethnic wares, including Peruvian tamales, Portuguese bread and a troika of local desserts: haupia, kulolo and haulolo. I sip fresh coconut juice and wander among stalls piled high with pink dragon fruit, fragrant lilikoi (passion-fruit), the largest pawpaw I've ever seen and many unfamiliar fruits and veges.

We drive over the island's green belly, past white sandy beaches and velvety forest canopies, wondering how the locals manage to drag themselves away from the scenery to do any work. "Big Islanders have the sacred art of relaxation down to a fine art," one waitress tells me. "There's a much slower pace here."

Human impact has certainly been more modest here than on the seven other inhabited Hawaiian islands. It could also be because of the weather: the Big Island boasts 11 climatic zones, ranging from tropical rain-forest to subarctic tundra. "We're used to carrying both a jacket and a sun-hat," says the waitress, shrugging.

By the time we arrive in Kona, famous for its coffee plantations, the island has slumped into a siesta beneath a heavy blanket of Hawaiian sun. Kona's coffee belt stretches for 50km and features about 700 plantations, most of them small, family-run



operations, such as Greenwell Farms, where we wander among the 650,000 coffee trees and see how beans are harvested, roasted and milled.

Halfway through a tasting, or cupping, session, we are relieved that the scorching heat is tempered by light showers that we're told you can set your watch by. It's this combination of hot, wet weather, high elevation and rich soil that makes Kona one of the world's most sought-after and expensive coffees.

Later, we swap coffee for beer and as Pharrell Williams' summery anthem *Happy* spills out of the bar, we watch the waves roll gently in. Had Captain Cook been with us, his feelings about this beautiful island would certainly have been different. ■

The writer was a guest of Hawaii Tourism.

MARTIN HAUGHNEY